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ABSTRACT

This monograph uses a question-answer format to address issues concerned with meeting the needs of gifted students as Wisconsin schools restructure and change grouping practices as part of raising standards of learning for all students. Among 12 questions considered are the following: (1) Aren't some of the principles of middle level education, cooperative learning and whole class instruction in reading harmful from the standpoint of providing appropriate programs to gifted students? (2) Isn't acceleration a necessary component of gifted education but contradictory to the middle level philosophy? (3) If one views middle level education as anti-tracking and anti-ability grouping, then how is grouping at the middle of the pyramid ever acceptable? (4) "Doesn't participation in Midwest Talent Search promote labeling and an "earlier is better" approach to gifted education? (5) Don't research reports and declining test scores clearly support as little ability grouping as possible at all levels of education? (6) Won't cooperative learning increase boredom in gifted students and hold them back? (7) How can young gifted readers be challenged by whole class instruction in reading? and (8) How can we be sure school districts are asking the right questions about gifted education as these strategies are implemented? Includes 24 references. (DB)

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Ability Grouping for Gifted Learners as it Relates to School Reform and Restructuring

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INTRODUCTION

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has among its goals for school improvement the provision of an "appropriate" education for those students identified as gifted or talented. Standard (t) establishes expectations for gifted/talented programs. The inclusion of a separate standard for these learners acknowledges that the crisis in American schools includes talented learners who are achieving at levels not only below their potential but below their counterparts in other nations.

Glasser (1990, 426) states that most high school students "see quality in athletics, music, and drama, and a few find quality in advanced placement courses or in shop classes.... All except a few admit that, while they are capable of doing high quality work in class, they have never actually done any and have no plans to do any in the future." Shanker (1990, 346) states, "the overwhelming majority of American students who go on to college will be learning what their European counterparts learned in high school (or even junior high)."

The restructuring concepts being examined and implemented in Wisconsin schools are research supported practices that are intended to remove rigid, lock-step barriers to advancement in learning. Specifically, this paper examines questions related to middle level restructuring, cooperative learning and whole class instruction in reading. However, the common theme is ability grouping as it relates to any restructuring concept.

The need to remove barriers and promote active learning is clear. Legitimate concerns exist however, that in implementing new models, a "lock-step" system or "one size fits all" curriculum may simply be reinvented. We must be careful that we are not lowering the ceiling of student achievement when we know it is already too low. We must not abandon the athletic and music programs that now motivate students. We must not abandon advanced placement and other specialized classes that now challenge students. We must transfer successful practices from these situations to the broader educational structure. We must open the doors to higher levels of learning to more students, challenging them to achieve what they are capable of achieving. This paper addresses raising the standards of learning for ALL students with direct recognition that the needs of GIFTED learners must be considered in the process.

1. <u>Aren't some of the principles of Middle Level Education, Cooperative Learning and Whole Class Instruction in Reading harmful, in fact illegal, from the standpoint of providing appropriate programs to those students identified as gifted, Wis. Stat. 118.35?</u>

   With careful implementation, including provision of adequate staff development, support staff and materials, these instructional models should help teachers to be better rather than less able to differentiate instructional content, processes and products to match student characteristic learning needs.

   Staff development does not mean short-term or one-shot inservice, but sustained and systematic work on understanding and applying instructional strategies to specific areas of learning. As stated by Earle (1989, 1) staff need release time to "enlarge their sense of what is possible." This means "having

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opportunities for planning, attending meetings, networking and viewing examples of successful practices in other schools and classrooms."

For gifted learners in any subject or talent area, opportunities for enrichment and/or acceleration must be provided within the broader parameters of the cooperative learning strategy, whole class instruction framework or middle level structure. Like any new or research-supported educational systems, processes or concepts, these current philosophies are subject to misinterpretation or abuse. The appropriateness of the learning pace for gifted learners should be scrutinized and validated whatever the organizational or program strategy.

2. Isn't acceleration a necessary component of gifted education but contradictory to the middle level philosophy?

Acceleration simply means to go faster; and yes, it is a necessary component of gifted programming. That is to say, there will be some students for whom a faster pace than any established norm will be needed.

The literature on middle level education approaches the subject of acceleration with caution when it addresses it at all. On the one hand, the middle level model emphasizes high expectations for all students. Like most proposed educational reforms, it is predicated on findings that masses of American students are not performing well and that current curricular expectations are too low. On the other hand, the NASSP's Council on Middle Level Education states that it is erroneous to assume that "earlier is better" except for "those few early adolescents who have manifested earlier intellectual readiness for such challenges in specific curriculum areas" (Arth et al., 1989, 19). The pyramid model of gifted programming removes any suggestion of disparity between these viewpoints:

a. At the base of the pyramid, challenging instructional strategies are suggested for all students and differentiated curriculum based on the potential of many students is required.

b. At the middle of the pyramid, flexible grouping and regrouping in specific talent areas within or between "houses" would occur.

c. At the top we find those few for whom a more radically accelerated approach is indeed appropriate in the middle level philosophy.

3. If one views Middle Level education as anti-tracking and anti-ability grouping, then how is grouping at the middle of the pyramid ever acceptable?

Paul George, nationally recognized proponent of middle level education, states that "tracking, certainly at the middle level, may be the single most important unresolved issue in education" (1988, 22). It seems that if we are ever going to resolve the issue, we must first stop using the terms tracking and ability grouping synonymously.

George defines TRACKING as any between-class ability grouping. George (1988,26), like Slavin (1988, 71), proposes that " students should remain in heterogeneous classes at most times and be regrouped by ability only in subjects (e.g. reading, mathematics) in which reducing heterogeneity is particularly important." Neither George nor Slavin refer to within-class ability grouping as tracking.

We would define ABILITY GROUPING as being of varying durations in time, and not synonymous with tracking unless the groups were fixed, rigid, static and always composed of the same students regardless of the specific content or goals. It is acceptable, sometimes advisable, for gifted learners to be grouped together for specific learning experiences. For example, students demonstrating a need for advanced material in mathematics are often grouped together for algebra or geometry in seventh or eighth grade. If there is also an advanced class in another subject, it is unlikely that all of the students in the math class would be in the second class. Placement should be based upon specific learning needs. It should also be fluid, with ongoing assessments of all students' achievements being the basis for appropriate regroupings.

The NASSP's Council on Middle Level Education recognizes this difference in ability grouping and tracking in its recommendations:

> The fundamental purpose of grouping learners should be to place them in settings that best meet their needs. For gaining many types of experience, heterogeneous groups present more natural and lifelike situations. In others homogeneous groupings may have some advantages. Neither completely heterogeneous nor homogeneous approaches deal responsively with the developmental variance among young adolescents (Arth et al., 1989, 15).

The following principles of grouping are offered by the NASSP Council. All of these principles agree with principles of identification in gifted education and can be applied to groupings for courses or activities at the base or middle of the pyramid:

- Groupings should serve early adolescent developmental needs. Effective groupings depend to a large extent on adequate guidance in helping pupils select courses and co-curricular activities suited to their abilities and interests.

- Within classes, grouping on the basis of ability, achievement or interest in a specific area is more justifiable than grouping on the basis of general intelligence.

- Many criteria for determining pupil learning capacities should be utilized. Teachers' estimates should be included and the use of a single test score should be avoided. Previous performance in a subject and specific evaluations of readiness should be considered.

- The merits of ability, achievement, and interest must be clearly defined as they relate to grouping needs in specific areas of the middle level school program (Arth et al., 1989, 15-16).

4. <u>Doesn't participation in Midwest Talent Search promote labeling and an "earlier is better" approach to gifted education?</u>

No, just the opposite if talent search is appropriately managed as a part of middle level gifted programming. Let's consider talent search within the framework of these comments by Toepfer (1989, 3):

> Enrichment at a learner's present cognitive level can be more important in some circumstances than a narrow, linear, accelerated emphasis. . . . Middle level educators should not misinterpret this as trying to hold youngsters back or recommending challenges

below their special abilities. Certainly we should provide learning opportunities that appropriately challenge early adolescents who are capable of such higher level challenges. However, we should not require all gifted and talented youngsters to pursue these same challenges and activities. . . . For instance, how do we decide whether or not middle level students are ready to take a math course that includes high school mathematics content. . . requiring formal or abstract thinking abilities?

Talent search is not an identification process since you have already verified that participating students are academically talented by their qualifying achievement test scores. By taking the SAT, the students provide you with data regarding their abstract reasoning ability. The talent search "Program Planning Guide" provides you with a broad spectrum of suggested program options that range from primarily enrichment oriented to highly accelerative, based on the range of student performance on the SAT. Now you have specific achievement data on verbal and mathematical reasoning that will verify which students need enrichment (base of pyramid), which need some acceleration, e.g. algebra, as well as enrichment (middle of pyramid), and which are those early adolescents in need of exceptional higher level challenges (top of the pyramid). Talent search, then, is the basis of a counseling service which helps teachers, parents and students to form realistic expectations for achievement in the two test areas.

5. Don't research reports and declining test scores clearly support as little ability grouping as possible at all levels of education?

No. They support FLEXIBLE-PACING, i.e., "creating the best possible match between students' achievement and instruction, and allowing them to move forward in the curriculum as they achieve mastery of content and skills" (Daniel & Cox, 1988, 2). As Felhusen (1989, 58) states, "Surely we must try to improve education for all American youth. . .but our major weaknesses in achievement are in higher level conceptual learning, application, and problem solving. . . especially (among) those of high ability." A report from the U.S. Department of Education (January, 1990) substantiates this decline in advanced skills. Turning Points, the report of the task force on education of young adolescents, refers to a "dumbed-down" curriculum for young people in lower tracks. Locking students into lower tracks or simplifying curriculum for recognized high ability students by implying that one "core" size can ever fit all are equally unacceptable. Research supports that students are better adjusted socially as well as cognitively when they are given appropriate content regardless of how they are grouped. Grouping with age-mates and being offered a curriculum that fails to challenge them does not provide for the best social and cognitive adjustment (Kulik & Kulik, 1984). Our educational premise must be that of FLEXIBLE PACING: the best education matches the pace of instruction with individual abilities, interests and performance needs.

6. Some advocates of gifted education seem to also be advocates of cooperative learning whereby others seem concerned by it. How should we view cooperative learning?

View it first with caution, and then when you understand it and can use it as one instructional process which excites learning, embrace it. There are two reasons for that initial caution. First, cooperative learning is being promoted by some as an alternative to ability grouping, and it's not an either/or situation. There are times when cooperative learning will be the best approach to learning, whether in heterogeneous ability groups or homogeneous ability

groups. There are other times when competition is healthy and should be taught and encouraged. There are also times when students need to work alone. If cooperative learning is being promoted as the magical instructional solution to all questions of classroom structure, it is being misrepresented. Johnson and Johnson (1987, 5) state that for gifted students who are working far above grade level, strategies include "placing them in higher grades for certain subject areas for part of the day or having them study advanced material in homogeneous cooperative groups."

Secondly, cooperative learning does not occur naturally with all teachers. A single inservice session will not adequately prepare teachers to be effective cooperative group facilitators. Johnson and Johnson suggest, and many teachers have confirmed, that it takes two to three years for teachers to incorporate cooperative learning into their teaching style and repertoire. Staff development, coaching, and sharing among teachers must occur on an on-going basis.

7. Won't cooperative learning increase boredom in gifted students and "hold them back?"

Johnson and Johnson (1987, 3) state that "there is not evidence of high-achieving students being 'pulled down' by participating in heterogeneous cooperative groups, and considerable evidence that high-achievers are 'pushed-up.' High- achieving students more frequently use higher-level reasoning strategies, engage in deeper level and more critical analysis, derive more creative answers, and engage in more elaborative explanations when they learn in cooperative, as opposed to competitive or individualistic, learning situations." The premise is that, cooperative learning encourages thinking and one cannot be bored while actively engaged in thinking. However, Sapon-Shevi and Schniedewind (1989, 63) point out that "simply because a lesson is implemented cooperatively does not assure its value. Using cooperative techniques to have students cover the same boring, inconsequential, or biased material or to have them 'get through' worksheets doesn't demonstrate the approach's full potential for changing what goes on in school." We must examine what we teach as well as how we teach it. We must examine our goal for a particular lesson and then choose the teaching/learning strategy that best matches that goal.

8. What do we do about unfounded parent fears that their gifted youngsters will be held back or get lower grades because of slower students in their cooperative learning groups?

First of all, are their fears unfounded? If you are jumping on the bandwagon without dealing with the issue of individual accountability and differentiated tasks within the group structure, parents may have some legitimate concerns. Slavin (1989, 53) states that, "Cooperative learning can be an effective means of increasing student achievement but only if group goals and individual accountability are incorporated in the cooperative methods. . . . Studies of methods in which students work together to prepare a single worksheet or project without differentiated tasks hardly ever find achievement benefits." Second, if cooperative learning is benefiting all students, including gifted, workshops for parents and/or individual parent conferences should be arranged to address their concerns and allay their fears. Examples like the following can be shared as well as the specifics of group goals, differentiated tasks and means of individual accountability:

> Jenny, a high-achieving student was concerned that her grades might suffer because of the group work. Lynda offered to delete the cooperative scores from Jenny's average and give her the average of her individual scores. The results surprised both Jenny and her parents. Her average with all included was 97 percent while her individual average, excluding the cooperative scores, was only 96 percent. This is a typical result. Very seldom do cooperative assignments have a negative effect on student averages (Augustine et al., 1989, 7).

9. How can young gifted readers possibly be challenged by whole class instruction in reading?

Whole class instruction is not the only method of teaching reading, but is one organizing principle. Because of problems inherent in the traditional three reading groups/basal approach to reading, the Commission on Reading recommends alternative strategies including "switching group assignments periodically, using criteria other than ability for group assignments, and increasing the time devoted to whole class instruction" (Cook, 1986, 112). DPI elaborates its position on whole class instruction (112):

> For some purposes, whether at the elementary, middle, or secondary level, instruction is most appropriately given to the whole class. For example, skills and strategies may be taught to a whole class, with reinforcement and practice occurring in smaller groups according to instructional reading level. . . . Many motivational problems can be avoided if teachers will consider various kinds of grouping.

This does not mean that young gifted readers would be reading material at an inappropriately low level. Nor would they be receiving repetitive drill and practice. To the contrary, through strategic reading, of which whole class instruction is one part, the integrity of meeting individual student needs must be upheld. The creative and critical thinking processes are the same for all students, while the content and pace are appropriately varied. The young gifted reader should be applying and transferring skills to new situations as well as analyzing skills at a deeper level or faster pace than is possible through the more structured basal approach.

10. In the name of Whole Group Instruction in Reading we have been told that, "All students in a classroom, regardless of reading level or reading readiness, will be in the same basal, reading the same story." How can this be justified as instructionally sound?

As reading was traditionally taught with the basal and the related workbooks as the total reading curriculum, it is not possible to envision how this could be appropriate for the gifted reader. As whole group instruction is explained as a part of strategic reading, the basal is one possible part of a vast array of reading materials of various kinds and levels. A basal story, if used, is a springboard for assessing the students' background experiences, knowledge of a topic, vocabulary, skill development and interests. Workbooks might or might not be used. If used, workbook assignments would be varied to meet differentiated skill needs.

Following an initial whole group activity, students are grouped and regrouped for interest groups, cooperative learning groups, skill groups, peer coaching, projects, Jr. Great Books groups, silent reading, sustained writing activities, book friends across grade levels, dramatic interpretations, etc. Reading now

has a real purpose, there is a more extensive selection of materials, and students rotate between various types of small group and individual learning experiences. Students then may share their individual or group products with the whole class, the teacher may read aloud to the whole class, etc. Post-reading whole class activities become the transition to the next pre-reading whole class activities and a variation of the total reading cycle. The implied purpose of reading to learn rather than just learning to read guides the planning of these activities.

Having all students always read the same material at the same pace for the same purposes in heterogeneous classes is not appropriate. Using whole group instruction as explained above, however, is a part of FLEXIBLE PACING. Even in schools where a modified Joplin plan is used for grouping classes by reading level, whole class instruction must be accompanied by small group and individual instruction.

11. It seems that whole class instruction would be more difficult for teachers to manage than the traditional reading groups. How is this being addressed?

Herein lies the danger with all three of the models under discussion. The whole class instruction approach as part of strategic reading will require on-going professional development of teachers. We've already said the same about middle level restructuring and cooperative learning. Whole class instruction in reading will also most likely require the support of reading specialists to help classroom teachers with the differentiated tasks through which students are learning at any given time. Districts must have the commitment, including administrative support and funding, to integrate all of these restructuring and instructional models successfully. They will not be successful if used as band-aids or if used by simply jumping on a bandwagon without considering the implications for staff training and support.

12. How can we be sure that our district is asking the right questions about gifted education as they implement any of these strategies?

Use the pyramid as a framework. From a support standpoint, ask if coordination, staff development and parent/community involvement are adequate. Are all students assessed for potential giftedness? What are the policies and practices on FLEXIBLE PACING? How are related counseling services addressed? What is the evaluation or accountability plan for checking the appropriateness of the curriculum for gifted students?

From a student programming standpoint, question the model or strategy at the three levels of implementation. At the base of the pyramid - is the model recognizing and developing strengths and talents in many students? In other words, is it flexible and open to challenging students who otherwise might have been missed or wrongly stereotyped? At the middle of the pyramid - does it allow for grouping and regrouping for specific courses and co-curricular activities that could not occur in the regular classroom or without going beyond the core curriculum? Is there rigor and challenge for students who need to learn, practice and perform at an accelerated pace? At the top - does it actively find, support and develop the talents and abilities of the few who have manifested earlier readiness for advanced learning in any talent area?

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